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Yemen, Yeah Man!

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, March 14 — In the hyperdramatic Situation Room of the White House, the Special Coordinating Committee of the National Security Council was meeting. The "crisis": Yemen, an ally of Saudi Arabia, was being invaded by South Yemen, led by Communist radicals.

With a studied calm that accentuates tension, the Director of Central Intelligence, former naval person Stansfield Turner, briefed. Satellite observation was buttressed by reports from operatives on the scene. The D.C.I. was able to show how the invaders were aiming for the vital road that traversed the beleaguered invader.

Gen. Davey Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, crisply reviewed the military options; one person who sat in that room passed the word that Jones was the star of the "crisis."

David Aaron of the National Security Council staff, who chaired the meeting, was more hawkish than usual. The State Department's Warren Christopher predictably counseled a form of masterly inactivity. Vice President Mondale, a long-time explicator of the Administration's noninvolvement policies, read the mood of the public and switched toward "doing something."

Our executive brats took action by using, for the first time, a loophole in arms-sale legislation that permits the President to act without waiting for the 30-day review by Congress. With lightning speed, \$390 million worth of F-5E jets, M-60 tanks and "Vulcan" antiaircraft weaponry with electronic fire control went winging to Yemen.

Hawkish hearts leaped up! By jingo, we thought, at last the Carter Administration was getting the word from the country. The sober second thought set in.

The Yemeni Army, which on paper has 37,000 men, in reality can field less than 10,000 troops, plus tribal mercenaries. Less than 10 percent of them can read or write in their own language. What are they going to do with \$390 million worth of our most advanced planes, tanks and guns this month? They do not know how to unpack the crates.

Ah, but we are sending along "advisers." That word is usually surrounded by quotation marks, since it was the euphemism for the first United States troops sent to Vietnam in that era when we would pay any price and bear any burden.

With a straight face, the Defense Department assured us that these advisers would not carry so much as a penknife, nor go anywhere near a fighting zone, and would not be followed by hordes of other advisers.

But we know that in a pinch, our advisers — and those who follow — will be flying the planes and driving the tanks, or else hightailing it out of Yemen while Communists grab our expensive new equipment to use against the Saudis.

This is really what happened:

After Afghanistan and Iran fell, and after Saudi Arabia and Pakistan made diplomatic moves toward the Soviets, Mr. Carter came to realize that his supine foreign policy had led to a worldwide perception of American weakness. This global assessment of a loss of American will was dangerous abroad and politically damaging at home. The Administration was desperate to reassert American power.

Along came the attack on Yemen, which, three months ago, would not have caused a meeting in the White House laundry room, much less the Situation Room. The Carter men let the Saudis know they would do anything the Saudis wanted, but the Saudis kept sending conflicting signals, so the Carter men threw tons of arms at the problem.

Ignoring the Congress, the Carter men have put American men and material on the line without planning our next step. "To change from a policy of opposition-nowhere to opposition-anywhere is as foolish as no change at all," says Wisconsin Democrat Les Aspin.

Let's ask ourselves: Are we prepared to put American troops in the field to protect Saudi Arabia if the Northern Yemenis are overrun? If the polls show such a move to be unpopular, this season's Carter foreign policy would likely shift again.

The notion that we are sending advisers off to an unknown country, with the President escaping Congressional oversight in arms sales, would have

been laughable a few months ago; now, because Mr. Carter needs to compensate for his two-year orgy of pacifism, that is just what's happening.

In truth, the United States has only one militarily effective peacekeeping ally in the Mideast, which in 1970 helped us stop the Syrian invasion of Jordan. When I recently asked a very high Israeli official (whose name was immortalized in Kennedy's thousand-days quotation) if Israeli troops would be available to stop a Communist takeover of Saudi Arabia, his reply was, "Don't put ideas in my head." But he is the first head of state the U.S. President would call.

The recent spasm of Walter Mitty toughness in the Situation Room is no serious "drawing of the line," and no substitute for the sustained strength that has been missing in Carter foreign policy.